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ABSTRACT

Although school violence has been a concern in the United States for over two decades, the topic has only recently generated serious study in Canada. Central to the development of effective violence-mitigation policies is an understanding of how and why student victims, perpetrators, and observers respond to the school-based violence they experience. This paper introduces research exploring such issues through the viewpoint of students at five central Alberta junior high schools. The study explored the variables that most influenced students' responses to violence, as well as their perceptions regarding their schools' responses to the victims and perpetrators of violent behaviors. Data were gathered from a questionnaire of 231 out of 381 students from grades 7-9, 5 principals, and 23 out of 39 junior high school administrators from 39 junior high schools in three school districts. Findings show that students' and administrators' perceptions and ways of dealing with violence in the schools differed markedly. Students expressed an unwillingness to report violence for fear of reprisal and perceived a lack of teacher concern and effectiveness. Observers actively chose not to report the violence they witnessed. Recommendations for breaking the "code of silence" include: (1) encourage staff to speak freely; (2) provide victim support; and (3) invest in prevention programs. Ten tables and one figure are included. (Contains 30 references.) (LMI)

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EXPLORING ISSUES OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE:

THE "CODE OF SILENCE"

by

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Exploring Issues of School Violence: The "Code of Silence"

Although a concern in the United States for over two decades, (Marvin, McCann, Connolly, Temkin, & Henning, 1976) the topic of school violence in Canada has only recently generated serious study. Sporadic research has largely been positivistic, trying to assess: (a) whether there is a problem (e.g., Ryan, Mathews, & Banner, 1993; Wall, 1995), (b) the nature of what does exist (e.g., Kasian, 1992; Smith, Bertrand, Arnold & Hornick, 1995), and (c) what strategies are most effective in maintaining "order and discipline," as legislated by many school acts across Canada (e.g., Gabor, 1995).

Notwithstanding the valuable contribution of these studies on youth violence, the study of school violence must move towards a deeper examination of issues that will facilitate the development of more effective and appropriate policies. Central to such issues is an understanding of how and why student victims, perpetrators, and observers respond to the school-based violence they experience. This paper introduces research exploring such issues through the viewpoint of students at five Central Alberta junior high schools. In addition we will seek to: (a) interpret the meaning of violence in the school setting, (b) outline some of the challenges facing educators in reducing school violence, (c) summarize recent data related to the response of students to violence, and (d) provide practical suggestions for developing or enhancing strategies directed at prevention and response to violence in schools.

Purpose of the Study

In order to mitigate the effects of violent behaviors, schools are establishing policies and practices so as to effectively respond to student victims, witnesses or perpetrators. To date, there exists little in the way of understanding the impact students' perceptions and chosen response to violence have on the management of the broad spectrum of violent activities they experience. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to explore the variables which most influence students' response to violence, as well as their perceptions regarding their schools' responses to the victims and perpetrators of violent behaviors.

Review of the Literature

Defining School Violence

Historically, "school violence" has been synonymous with criminal activities occurring in schools: gang wars, illicit drug use, vandalism, weapon possession, and personal assault. The problem with identifying violence in such narrow, legalistic terms is that it remains an issue of law enforcement (Mawhinney, 1995). In fact, violence is an issue addressed in many legalistic and non-legalistic terms:

> Violence is unjust or unwarranted exercise of force, usually with the accompaniment of vehemence, outrage, or fury. (Black's Law Dictionary)
>
> Violence is the threat of/or use of force that injures or intimidates a person (makes that person feel afraid) or damages property. (B.C Teachers' Federation Task Force on Violence, 1994).
>
> Violence is anything that denies human dignity and leads to a sense of helplessness or hopelessness. (Martin Luther King)

From the point of view of teachers or school administrators, school violence encompasses those behaviors which seriously disrupt the safe learning environment of classrooms or schools. It includes "anything that affronts a child or teacher or staff member's ability to function in a safe, conductive learning environment" (Wiseman, 1993, p. 3). Although it is beneficial to frame the meaning of school violence in words that are meaningful and comprehensive, the danger lies in expanding the context to include a plethora of behaviors and activities that are properly considered "disruptive," but not necessarily "violent." As West (1993) argued, such broad definitions of violence serve to distort and unduly escalate the "moral panic" associated with school violence discussions.

Ten years ago, there were already concerns expressed suggesting that grouping behavioral or discipline problems together with crime and violence would lead to public hysteria (Wayson, 1985). For this reason, it is critical that any policies and practices which address school violence be rooted in unambiguous and consistent definitions of the very behaviors and activities they seek to prevent or respond to. In 1993, the Nova Scotia *Discipline Handbook* outlined ten criminal, as well as non-criminal behaviors, under the category of severely disruptive:

1. Disruption of the operation of the school e.g., setting fires, pulling fire alarms.
2. Illegal activity e.g., selling a controlled substance, selling stolen property.
3. Physical violence e.g., use of force or inciting the use of force to injure.
4. Racial Misconduct e.g., use of racial slurs, ethnic name-calling.
5. Sexual Assault e.g., touching a sexual part of the body without consent.
6. Sexual Misconduct or Physical Abuse.
7. Sexual Harassment e.g., a touch or sexual comment unwanted by the receiver.
8. Vandalism e.g., committing or inciting others to commit malicious damage to property.
9. Verbal abuse e.g., using or inciting others to use language intended to threaten or intimidate.
10. Weapons.

A collaborative research initiative (Alberta Education, 1996) involving universities and teacher associations in Alberta has used the term severely disruptive behaviors interchangeably with school violence. It is within this context that school violence has been framed in this paper.

Extent of School Violence

The violence observed in schools cannot be viewed in isolation from the violence prevalent in our society. By the time children complete elementary school, television viewing has shown them 8,000 murders and over 100,000 acts of violence (Campbell, 1993). Added to this are daily news media accounts of domestic violence, child abuse, physical and sexual assaults. It could be argued, therefore, that school is simply a reflection of the violence that is seen and experienced in society.

Several studies point to data that dispute this contention. Smith, Bertrand, Arnold, and Hornick (1995) found in their study of 962 junior and senior high school students in Calgary, that victimization rates were are higher at school (81%) than elsewhere (69%), thereby challenging some educators who believe that youth violence is a problem more prevalent in the larger community than in schools. This same study identified nine types of victimization: threatened with a weapon; something damaged; something stolen; something taken by force; threatened, kicked or slapped; attacked by a gang or group; someone exposing themselves; sexually touched against one's will. Of these, something stolen (55.6%), something damaged (43.6%), being threatened (42.3%), and being slapped or kicked (37.1%) were the most prevalent victimization identified amongst students.

Research on weapons use in Canadian schools (Walker, 1994) found that 42% of police agencies polled reported seizing knives from youth aged 12 to 17 years within schools on school property. This figure increased from 35% reported the previous year. For the same time period, 74% of surveyed school authorities, representing 69 school boards across Canada, reported seizing knives from students. This was up from 58% in 1992. The use of weapons, by perpetrators as well as victims, in settling disputes was reported to be increasing. Knives were the preferred weapon of both perpetrators and victims.

A survey of 231 urban junior high school students (MacDonald, 1995), found that over one-half of students had experienced physical forms of violence (e.g., fights, bullying, punching, hitting, grabbing), verbal threats, and theft or damage of property. One-fifth of male students indicated that they had been threatened with a weapon at school. Sexual harassment was experienced by over 25% of female students, and ethnic conflict affected one-quarter of the student participants. Despite the fact that only 4% of students responded that they never felt safe at school, 20% of students had observed weapons in their schools and over 50% considered bullying to be "very big" or "big" problems.

The Role of Schools

The legal framework relevant to safe schools can be found in the: (a) *Criminal Code* (1985), (b) *Young Offenders Act* (1985), (c) *Constitution Act* (1982), (d) *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982), (e) provincial school acts, and (f) common law. For example, the common law standard of care owed to students by administrators is that of a reasonably prudent or careful parent in similar circumstances. The options available for such prudence and care are complex involving both civil and criminal law, as well as federal and

provincial legislation. School administrators' moral and legal obligations to provide violence-free schools are complex.

With the exception of British Columbia and Quebec, the provincial *School Acts* outline the duties of administrators and teachers to maintain "order" or "proper order" and "discipline" in the school. British Columbia does not use these words, and deals with the duties of teachers and principals in its regulations. Effectively, they are bound to deal with severely disruptive behaviors or any incident of violence in the school. Administrators may be found liable for negligence in supervision, for example, for allowing violent acts to occur, especially if there is evidence of a student's violent propensities and no steps were taken by the administrator to intervene.

Despite differing views on the true nature and extent of school violence, there is a general consensus that schools are legally bound to provide students with a safe learning environment (e.g., Keel, & Goto, 1994; Solomon, 1994). What is not as readily agreed upon, given the contention that school violence simply mirrors societal violence, is who is ultimately responsible for addressing the root causes of violent behaviors in schools. As Schmidt, Paquette and Dickinson (1990) argued, schools cannot be expected to solve all of the ills of society.

Violent behaviors in schools can certainly be attributed to a combination of societal causes which are not always under the direct control of our educational institutions. Ideally, youth violence should be mitigated through a multi-disciplinary approach, based on collaboration amongst students, teachers, administrators, parents, police, the courts, and government. Efforts at developing such a model should not preclude schools from playing a leadership role by virtue of their tremendous potential to positively influence the lives of young people.

Responses to School Violence

Although this is slowly changing, perceptions on issues related to school violence have been drawn primarily from administrators (e.g., Wall, 1995), teachers (e.g., BCTF, 1994; Wall, 1991), and police (e.g., Newark & Kessel, 1994), but not extensively from students themselves. Studies that have collected student data point to a number of violent behaviors that are typically underreported or underplayed by adults (e.g., Heath, 1994; Kasian, 1992; Mathews, 1994; Pepler & Craig, 1994; Ryan, Mathews & Banner, 1993; Walker, 1994). An American study of peer bullying and sexual harassment (Shakeshaft et al., 1995) indicated that many students complained that school personnel did not intervene when observing student-to-student harassment. Furthermore, students often perceived that many of their teachers themselves encouraged such behaviors by their own behavior towards them.

Garofalo, Siegel and Laub (1987), found that some children may feel that adults are inept or disinterested in protecting them from bullies and therefore consciously chose to keep their victimization to themselves. In a recent national survey (Day, Golench, MacDougall & Beals-Gonzalez, 1995) on school-based violence-reduction policies, fewer than 20% of the 126 respondent school boards in Canada had policies on: (a) victim aftermath programs, (b) procedures for policy/program evaluation, (c) responding to emergencies, (d)

conducting incidence surveys, (e) alternative-to-suspension programs, (f) screening curricula for violent content, (g) trespassers, (h) sexual assault, (I) gangs, and (j) site security.

An enhanced awareness of how student victims, perpetrators as well as observers respond to school-based violence is therefore invaluable. Such insights will be instrumental in determining which strategies and programs best address response, intervention and prevention of school violence.

Research Method

This study was exploratory in nature, given the limited amount of research conducted on Alberta students' perceptions of school violence. Its primary purpose was to develop the beginnings of an understanding of the issues and identify areas for further research. This study did not seek to advance generalizations on the topic of school violence or more specifically, violence in Alberta's junior high schools.

Sample

Data were gathered using a two-pronged approach: (a) a questionnaire was used to collect data from the administrators and students of five selected junior high schools, and (b) questionnaires were mailed to the 39 junior high school administrators of the three districts used in the student survey.

Primary Data Source. The sample of students completing the questionnaire was dictated by three factors: (a) school selection by district central administration (there was one exception, the principal of one school contacted the researcher and asked that his school be included in the study for reasons not provided), (b) class selection by the schools' principals, (c) individual student participation by providing signed and returned student and parental consent forms. Individual classes were designated by the principals for study by the researcher. Hence, the sample of students and principals was not randomly selected.

The sample consisted of 231 grades 7, 8, and 9 students drawn from five central Alberta junior high schools. The students and the principals, of the respective schools, were asked to complete a questionnaire consisting of 13 Likert-type questions. One open-ended question was included at the end of the survey asking participants about their thoughts on school violence.

Of a possible 381 students, a total of 231 completed the questionnaire; this represented 56% females (n=130) and 44% males (n=101). Five principals of the selected schools were requested to complete a questionnaire similar to that of the students. These were completed during the time that the students were administered surveys by the researcher.

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Secondary Data Source. Questionnaires were mailed to the 39 junior high schools in the three districts represented. Twenty-three junior high school administrators completed a mail-out questionnaire, representing approximately a 60% response rate.

School Demographics

Each of the five schools in the study were stand-alone junior high schools; four public and one public-separate. Schools that participated in the study were representative of a broad spectrum of socio-economic conditions. Two schools were located in an urban center with a population of approximately 60,000. The community consisted of largely white middle to upper-middle class residents. This community has a high percentage of young families; families with children 10-14 years of age being pre-dominant.

The remaining three schools were also located in a large urban center with an approximate population of 700,000 people. These schools serve communities which are densely populated, multi-cultural, and consist primarily of lower to lower-middle class people. Youth crime, especially ethnic gang-related crime, is a problem in these areas.

Student Questionnaire

The student questionnaire solicited the following types of data: (a) personal data regarding the students' grade and sex, (b) data related to the types of violent behaviors the student had experienced and/or observed at school, (c) the perceptions of the seriousness of specified violent behaviors, (d) perceptions the student had of the principal's and teachers' awareness of school violence, (e) the perceptions the student had of their personal ability to deal with specified conflict, (f) student perceptions of the conditions in which he or she would inform a teacher or principal about witnessing or being victim of specified violent behaviors, and (g) an opportunity for the student to provide additional comments regarding school violence.

Questions relating to student satisfaction of the school's management of violence, addressed the manner in which either victims or perpetrators of violence were dealt with by school administrators and teachers. Students' responsibility for responding to violence was assessed by exploring which variables most influences their decision to report violent behaviors at school. Data were gathered to allow analysis on the basis of many variables, including: grade, gender, the perceived seriousness of the incident, and the relationship to the victim or perpetrator of school violence.

Administrator Questionnaire

The administrator questionnaires asked the same questions as those asked of students. The only difference was that the questions were reworded to reflect the administrative context. As well, their questionnaire did not provide as many variables for selecting conditions under which students would report victimization or witnessing of violence (e.g., relationship to the perpetrator).

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Data Analysis

A number of methods were used to analyze questionnaire data: (a) frequency counts and percentages were derived for appropriate questions, and (b) comparisons were made of responses based on grade and sex to determine if differences existed among groups: gender, student grade, students and administrators. Responses to the open-ended question were analyzed thematically.

To test for significant differences ($\alpha = 0.05$) amongst pairs of data (e.g., male/female, administrator/students); t-tests were performed using SPSS Release 4.0 for Macintosh. Analysis of variance between grades used the Scheffe procedure of multiple comparisons with α set at the 0.05 level. This was done to determine which pairs of grades (7, 8; 7, 9; or 8, 9) had significantly different means.

Written responses were analyzed on the basis of emergent "themes" related to issues identified through the review of related research. Selected comments were used to enhance and supplement relevant statistical findings.

Findings and Discussion

The findings obtained from the data collected from the sample of 231 students, as well as their principals are summarized below. The analysis and discussion is divided into five subsections: (a) student perceptions of safety at school, (b) observed versus personally experienced violence, (c) perceptions of the schools' management of violence, (d) reporting of violence, and (e) administrators' perceptions.

Perceptions of "Feeling Safe"

In response to the general question "do you feel safe at school?" students answered positively (see Table 1). That is, approximately 75% of the students said that they felt safe at school "always" or "most of the time." Using a t-test and ANOVA respectively, there were no significant differences ($\alpha = 0.05$) found between female and male students, or among grades in student responses to this question.

(Insert Table 1 about here)

More specific questions addressing what behaviors students had experienced provided a different perspective on what constituted "feeling safe" at school. Over one-half of students indicated that they had experienced physical forms of violence (e.g., fights, bullying, punching, hitting, grabbing), verbal threats and theft or damage of property. One-fifth of male students indicated that they had been threatened with a weapon at school. Sexual harassment was experienced by over 25% of female students, and ethnic conflict affected one-quarter of the student participants. Despite the fact that only 4% of students responded that they never felt safe at

school, 20% of students observed weapons and over 50% considered bullying to be "very big" or "big" problems.

Three-quarters of the students provided comments to the open-ended question on their questionnaire. Of these, approximately 45% wrote statements which portray interesting perceptions of what constitutes "feeling safe." The following represent four notions of "feeling safe":

> I think school violence is not very bad in our school, but there is alot of name calling and ethnic conflict. (grade 7 male)
>
> I think that in this school violence is almost non-existent. However, racism is, I'm a victim of it and I don't like it. (grade 7 female)
>
> There is alot of vilince [sic], I hang around a tough croud [sic] and my best friend is very tough so I feel I have nothing to be scared of. (grade 9 female)
>
> School violence is not a problem. I wouldn't let anybody try and kick my butt, I would kick butt. (grade 9 male)

Student Victimization and Witnessing of School Violence

Students were asked to indicate, based on observation and personal experience, what they perceived to be the extent of certain violent behaviors were at their school. The data found in Table 2 show that students consider violent behaviors to be more problematic on the basis of observation rather than personal victimization. The highest ranking problems were: "teasing, swearing, name calling;" "theft/vandalism," bullying and "punching, hitting, grabbing." Contrary to the recent media hype (Stewart, Calgary Herald, 1995) "threats with weapons" was perceived to be a "little problem " or "no problem" by over 80% of student respondents.

(Insert Table 2 about here)

Gender was a factor only in one category of observed violent behaviors (see Table 3). Female students ranked "sexual harassment" to be a larger problem than did the male students. Females were consistent in that they also considered, on the basis of personal experience, "sexual harassment" as a bigger problem (see Table 3). Kasian's (1992) study of Ottawa students from grade 8-13 showed similar findings, with sexual harassment being rated a more prevalent behavior by female than male students. Males ranked only the problem of "fights" as a bigger problem based on their personal experience.

(Insert Table 3 about here)

Based on personal observations, grade 7 students considered "verbal threats" to be a bigger problem than did students in either grade 8 or 9 (see Table 4). This is an interesting finding in that significantly more grade 8 students had experienced "verbal threats;" "punching, hitting, grabbing;" "bullying;" "ethnic conflict;" and yet did not consider these behaviors as "big" or "very big" problems (see Table 5).

(Insert Table 4 about here)

(Insert Table 5 about here)

One possible explanation for this difference could be that, although grade 8 students experience more, they have been conditioned to have a higher tolerance for violent behaviors and therefore do not consider them to be a big problem. The Ryan et al. (1993) study found similar trends, hypothesizing that as students get older they begin to interpret violence as a "normal" part of their school experience. Several student comments would appear to support this view:

> I'm not saying that school violence is the right thing to do but its normal and we just put up with it. (grade 8 male)

> Fights are sometines just a way for people to solve an argument or a deal with only hurting each other not everyone around them . I think that teachers should let students fight supervised so that the weapons are controlled. (grade 8 male)

> I feel badly when little kids get picked on. But everyone has there [sic] time in there[sic] life when they get picked on! (grade 9 female)

Management of School Violence

Students were asked to respond to a series of questions regarding their satisfaction with their school's response to perpetrators of violence as well as the treatment of victims, by school staff. As illustrated by data in Table 6, as well as the following comments, there is a perception gap between students' and teachers' awareness of school violence, which often leads to a sense of frustration and a belief that violence is largely ignored or unseen:

> I think that there is alot of conflict within our school. There is so much going on, and yet no one does anything about it. (grade 8 female)

> I think alot of things are not noticed by teachers, principals. (grade 9 male)

> Some things are so common that they are ignored...teachers don't care enough about name calling, ethnic fights, teasing and stealing. They only care if blood is spilled so they can't be charged. Name calling can be hurtful but nobody cares. (grade 8 female)

(Insert Table 6 about here)

Students also indicated that were not always satisfied with the school's response to the participants of violent behaviors (see Table 7), and most especially with respect to the victims:

> Sometimes when teachers find out about stuff they just cause more trouble than good by accusing other people of doing things. (grade 8 male)
>
> I think the teachers should be more involved with what goes on at school and try helping the victims. (grade 7 female)
>
> Sometimes the principal never does anything. I was threatened by a lot of popular people, that is why I never want to be popular. (grade 8 female)

(Insert Table 7 about here)

Reporting of Violence

Students were asked to complete a series of questions in tabular format, in order to gain a better understanding of the circumstances under which they would take responsibility for informing an adult (teacher or principal) of a violent incident that they had witnessed or were victims of. Using a Likert-type scale, each of the 10 behaviors was separated in categories of perspectives: (a) as a victim, and (b) as an observer. The variables were: (a) the type of violent behavior; (b) the relationship to the perpetrator as a witness or as a victim; (c) the relationship to the victim as a witness; (d) whether the victim, perpetrator or witness was older, younger, female, male, popular, unpopular, physically larger, physically smaller; (e) whether others were witnessing the victimization or not. A sample choice read: "If you were a victim of bullying, and the perpetrator was older, you would '*always*' tell a teacher/principal."

Thirty-five percent of students responded that they would "never" tell if they witnessed any violent behavior, regardless of their relationship to, or characteristics of, the victim or perpetrator, When including items marked "sometimes," this number increased to 70%. Witnesses of school violence were more likely to report incidents to teachers if there were no other witnesses present. In addition, students would report victimization more readily if the perpetrator (a) was not a friend, (b) was younger, (c) was physically smaller, (d) was unpopular, and (e) no one else was watching.

A number of behaviors stood out more favorably in terms of student reporting. Approximately 40% of students indicated that they would "always" tell as victims or witnesses of (a) sexual harassment and (b) threats with weapons. This number dropped to 30% for ethnic conflict. There are some notable differences, regarding sexual harassment, and threats with weapons, which had larger percentages (approximately 40%) of students that would "always" tell as victims or witnesses. The small proportion of students who would report is not surprising, given some of their comments:

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> Kids are scared to rat on other kids because they will get the shit kicked out of them. This is wrong. I wish things would change. (grade 9 male).
>
> Fights are really brutal and nobody tells because then they'll get beaten up. (grade 9 female)
>
> I have seen the victims and witnesses who had told on the person making the fights, who have been beaten up for it. (grade 7 female)

A number of students commented on several reasons for their failure to report witnessing or being a victim of school violence. One of the most common themes expressed, related to a fear of retaliation; a finding consistent with other studies (e.g., Ryan et al., 1993; Kasian, 1992):

> Kids are scared to rat on other kids because they will get the shit kicked out of them. This is wrong. I wish that things would change. (grade 9 male)
>
> I have seen the victims and witnesses who had told on the person making the fight, who have been beaten up for it. (grade 7 female)
>
> Fights are really brutal and nobody tells because then they'll get beaten up. (grade 9 female)

A belief that taking matters into their own hands was an effective solution was also expressed by many of the students:

> ...popular people beat geeks up and I think people should start carrying weapons to protect themselves. (grade 8 female)
>
> If someone is beating you up you have the right to beat them up. (grade 9 female)

Fear of becoming a victim of violence also dominated many of the written remarks:

> I think that school violence should try to be stopped, because some people are afraid to even come to school, because they think they're going to be beaten up. (grade 8 female)
>
> The only way to keep yourself from being a victim is to stay out of other people's business and don't say anything stupid that could get people made at you. (grade 9 female)
>
> Sometimes in the morning coming to school or passing a different Jr high or high school I feel insecure. I try to walk by quickly or get to class. When someone tells me someone is out to get me. I get scared. I look around before I go outside and look inside the bathroom before I go. (grade 8 male)

A belief in resolving conflict physically without the aid of teachers was as powerful a strategy as was the reluctance to report incidents of violence from a real fear of reprisal. Perceptions of ineffective consequences for perpetrators, the lack of teacher awareness of incidents, and a perceived lack of teacher concern for victims

were additional factors which exerted pressure on students to accept victimization and develop alternate strategies such as taking matters into their own hands through retaliation. In many cases, students stated that they intentionally did not, nor would not report victimization or witnessing of school violence:

> Most of the time the kids won't envolve [sic] teachers or adults and the victim will keep being the victim till someone tells which doesn't happen. (grade 7 female)
>
> I won't rat on anyone because I don't want anyone to come after me. (grade 9 male)
>
> We're all one family of teenagers and we stick up for each other (grade 7 female)
>
> People who "rat out" ot tell on people are liable to be beaten up so I just kind of stay out of it. (grade 8 male)

Victims of theft or property damage were more likely to report such, than witnesses (see Figure 1). Friendship, age and the presence of other witnesses were the strongest variables in influencing decisions to report. This is consistent with the comments students provided:

> As long as its not me or anyone of my friends or someone I care about then I'm not worried about it. (grade 9 female)
>
> Nothing will happen to you if you have backup like tough friends or older brothers. (grade 7 male)

(Insert Figure 1 about here)

In terms of behaviors, students were least likely to report the teasing, name-calling; verbal threats; fights; and bullying (see Figure 1). A study of 1,000 middle and high school students in New York state (Shakeshaft et al. 1995) found that students were so used to being told by parents and school staff to ignore offending verbal harassment, that they were effectively conditioned not to report it. Although this hypothesis cannot be substantiated in this study, it does offer a possible explanation for the high percentage of students who would not report verbal harassment. Threats with weapons and sexual harassment ranked the highest in terms of students' willingness to report. The majority of students also indicated that both of these behaviors were the most serious infractions of all of the ten listed (see Table 10).

(Insert Table 10 about here)

Similar patterns emerged regarding the reporting of victimization. The variables in order of influence were: friendship with the perpetrator, the presence of others, popularity, size and age of the perpetrator. Regarding sexual harassment, male victims were more likely to report victimization as well as witnessing, than female students. The opposite tendency emerged with respect to reporting theft or vandalism; more female

students reporting than male. Students were most "undecided" about reporting sexual harassment (7.3%) and ethnic conflict (8.8%). Interestingly, students also responded that teachers seldom aware of sexual harassment and victims were not dealt with effectively. Sixty-one percent of students considered ethnic conflict, and 72% considered sexual harassment to be serious infractions (see Table 10). It is therefore difficult to determine from this data, which of the variables (e.g., seriousness of infraction, awareness by teachers, treatment of victims, relationship to or characteristics of the perpetrator) most influence students' decision to report victimization.

(Insert Table 11 about here)

Administrators' Perceptions

Of a possible 39 respondents in the secondary data source, 23 administrators completed and returned a mail-out questionnaire. After aggregating the responses from these 23 respondents as well as the five primary administrators, analysis of variance between administrators' (n = 28) and students' (n = 231) questionnaire responses showed significant differences ($\alpha = 0.05$) as summarized (see Tables 6, 8, 9):

1. Administrators perceived that school violence was less a problem than students did.
2. Administrators perceived that students were more satisfied with the treatment of victims and perpetrators of violence than students did.
3. Administrators felt that they and their staff were more aware of school violence than did students.
4. Administrators were more confident that students would report victimization or the witnessing of violent behaviors, with the exception of threats with weapons.

The differences between perceived awareness of school violence on the part of students and administrators (see Table 6) is not easily explained. On the one hand, as in the example of "threats with weapons," the findings could be supportive of Walker's (1994) conclusions on weapons use in Canadian schools. In this study, 344 police were asked to rank reasons for the reluctance of schools to report weapons. Of the thirteen possible answers, "denial or avoidance that a problem exists," "not recognizing there is a problem," "the school was able to deal with issues themselves," "differences in educators' and polices' philosophies" were the four most frequently top-rated factors (p.17).

However, this difference could also be attributed to principals and teachers not being informed of weapons' threats by student victims and witnesses. The finding of this study indicate that less than 50% of

students victims, and student witnesses would "always" tell teachers or their principal about a weapon's threat. Therefore, in this study, denial or avoidance on the part of educators is not necessarily an explanation for the significant differences between students' and teachers' awareness of "threats with weapons". Further research would be useful to explore such differences in more depth.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The following section addresses conclusions reached in the study. Theoretical and practical implications along with recommendations for future research are also outlined.

This study was designed to explore the perceived nature and management of violent behaviors in 5 junior high schools in central Alberta. One of the key findings from this study points to a marked difference between students' and administrators' perceptions of the magnitude and manner of dealing with violence in schools. If these differing views are generated by what appears to be an under-reporting of school-based, who is not reporting what and why?

Several explanations can be supported by the data. Very often, as the students indicated, they are reluctant to report incidents of violence from a fear of reprisal. Perceptions of ineffective responses or the perceived lack of teacher awareness and concern were additional factors which exert pressure on students to accept victimization and develop alternate strategies such as taking matters into their own hands through retaliation.

Lack of awareness among staff, together with students being unwilling to report episodes of violence seems a "recipe" for the kind of "code of silence" Mathews (1994) speaks of as so often distorting knowledge of the extent of school violence. At first glance, it may appear as though only a small minority (4%) of the students in this study were affected by school violence to the extent that they "never" felt safe at school. Added to this number, however, are those students who considered themselves to be mere bystanders and assume that they are not affected by violence. The burden of feeling that little can be done to alleviate their fears, the belief that violence is "normal," and fears of retaliation, are findings from this study that question how "passive" these observers really are. The data in this study support the fact that these observers are actively choosing not to report the violence they witness.

Recommendations

Mathews (1994) speaks of a "code of silence" which exists amongst staff and students which underplays the true nature and extent of violence in schools. The results of this study suggest that the nature of this "silence" is multi-faceted. Administrators do not simply avoid or deny that a problem may exist. In many cases, students are simply electing not to report their victimization.

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In many ways, it is the differing perceptions (e.g., media, public, teachers, students) of the nature and extent of school violence that also serves to perpetuate this problem. How is it possible to break this code of silence and work towards solutions? As a first step, school staff must be encouraged to speak freely to the realities of what is occurring in their schools, without pressure to suppress such discussions in the name of maintaining a positive public image of the school. Thus, the efforts of those who request assistance in dealing with school violence, must be applauded and supported.

It is unrealistic to suggest that schools can eradicate all of the root causes of youth violence. However, this should not preclude schools from taking the lead by building and maintaining schooling environments which reject a culture of violence. One of the best strategies in this regard is the investment in prevention programs. In order to be successful however, preventative strategies must involve a commitment by parents and their community to promote clear and consistent behavior standards; behavior not tolerated in the classroom cannot be condoned in hockey arenas, soccer fields, baseball diamonds, corner stores, or malls, for example. School violence can only be eliminated if community members commit to work collaboratively with schools and homes to address societal violence.

At the school level, prevention programs begin with an understanding of those elements that make a school safe. Hill and Hill (1994) found that a safe school has a sense of being and purpose and the students feel that they are a part of a community whose membership is known and accepted. Strategies focused on the building and sustaining of such a safe school have included: (a) the development of positive behavior programs that recognize the exemplary acts of students, (b) provision of resources that enable teachers to organize extra-curricular activities to promote a team environment amongst students, (c) having student involvement in behavior plan formulation, (d) initiation of school programs that recognize community service as an integral contribution by students, and (e) instituting curriculum that teaches students the skills needed for peaceful and co-operative problem solving.

One particular area that may be especially worth revisiting, is that of victim support. A number of salient comments were provided by students expressing their feelings of frustration related to their belief that little could be done to change positively the anxieties and fears that are part of actual or expected victimization. Unfortunately, aftermath support services which are designed to "address the trauma experienced by victims and witnesses of violent acts" (Day, et al., 1995, p. 191) exist in few of the surveyed boards in Canada.

Ultimately, the study of school violence must evolve beyond the gathering of statistics on the nature and extent of violent behaviors. Whereas such data are useful, researchers must continue to broaden their studies so as to expand theories regarding the moral dilemmas, fears and challenges faced by those students who are victims or witnesses of school violence. Such knowledge could highlight areas for improved school practices and policies that may no longer be effective in the prevention and response to violence.

As educators, we believe that the classroom must be a place where teachers are given the opportunity to teach, and students are provided with a safe environment conducive to learning. This is why our schools are

being challenged to reaffirm their commitment to students and staff that their safety and well-being is of paramount importance. The next decade will challenge us all to support the obligation of staff and the efforts of students, parents, and community to ensure that learning and teaching does occur in a safe, caring school environment, which supports respectful and responsible behavior. Our goal will be to convince our young people that violence is not a natural part of growing up:

> Violence is a part of this world and most people have come to accept that and deal with it by taking self-defense courses and carrying weapons. I'd like to see how you try and change the way people in the world today think. (female grade 8 student)

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Table 1. Students' perceptions of feeling safe at school.

Feeling Safe:	Always	Most of the Time	Sometimes	Never	Undecided
% of Students:	26%	53%	15%	4%	2%

Students ranked feeling safe on a 5-point scale; 4= Always; 3= Most of the time; 2= Sometimes; 1= Never; Undecided

Table 2. Comparison of Students' Perceived Extent of Personally Experienced School-based Violence versus Observed Extent of School Violence

	Mean of Extent of Problem	
Behavior	Observed	Experienced
Fights	2.55	2.06*
Threats with weapons	1.86	1.59*
Verbal threats	2.64	2.32*
Things damaged or stolen	2.75	2.29*
Bullying	2.67	2.14*
Punching, hitting, grabbing	2.68	2.16*
Sexual harassment	2.05	1.73*
Spat upon	1.99	1.67*
Teasing,swearing,name calling	2.95	2.57*
Ethnic conflict	2.19	1.86*

Students ranked extent of violent incidents on a 4-point scale;
4= A very big problem; 3= A big problem; 2= A little problem; 1= No problem.
* Significance at α =0.05

Table 3. Students' Perceived Extent of Personally Experienced School-based Violence by Gender.

	Mean of Personally Experienced Violence	
Behavior	Female (n=129)	Male (n=97)
Fights	1.94	2.22*
Threats with weapons	1.59	1.59
Verbal threats	2.28	2.36
Things damaged or stolen	2.30	2.27
Bullying	2.05	2.28
Punching, hitting, grabbing	2.10	2.23
Sexual harassment	1.94	1.45*
Spitting	1.71	1.60
Teasing,swearing,name calling	2.57	2.56
Ethnic conflict	1.78	1.94

Students ranked extent of violent incidents on a 4-point scale; 4= A very big problem; 3= A big problem; 2= A little problem; 1= No problem. * Significance at α =.05.

Table 4. Students' Perceived Extent of Observed School-based Violence by Grade.

Behavior	Mean of Observed Violence		
	Grade 7 (n=84)	Grade 8 (n=67)	Grade 9 (n=68)
Fights	2.59	2.56	2.45
Threats with weapons	2.03	1.81	1.72
Verbal threats	2.89*	2.45	2.51
Things damaged or stolen	2.87	2.72	2.64
Bullying	2.67	2.50	2.77
Punching, hitting, grabbing	2.75	2.58	2.71
Sexual harassment	1.97	2.10	2.07
Spitting on someone	2.01	1.94	1.97
Teasing,swearing,name calling	3.05	2.89	2.85
Ethnic conflict	2.07	2.40	2.13

Students ranked extent of violent incidents on a 4-point scale; 4= A very big problem; 3= A big problem; 2= A little problem; 1= No problem. * Significance (α =.05)

Table 5. Percentage and Frequency Distributions of Students who have Experienced Behaviors by Grade.

Behavior	Grade 7 (n=87)		Grade 8 (n=71)		Grade 9 (n=73)	
	%	freq.	%	freq.	%	freq.
Fights	44.8	39	59.2	42	50.7	37
Threats with weapons	13.8	12	14.1	10	19.2	14
Verbal threats	66.7	58	71.8	51	60.3	44
Things damaged or stolen	60.9	53	64.8	46	63.0	46
Bullying	42.5	37	50.7	36	54.8	40
Punching, hitting, grabbing	40.2	35	62.0*	44	60.3	44
Sexual harassment	16.1	14	32.4*	23	23.3	17
Spitting	23.0	20	29.6	21	32.9	24
Teasing,swearing,name calling	79.3	69	85.9	61	86.3	63
Ethnic conflict	16.1	14	33.8*	24	27.4	20
Other	1.1	1	2.8	2	5.5*	4

Students were asked to mark with a check (√) from a list provided, what they had experienced at school.
Significant difference at α =0.05

Table 6. Extent to which Students and Administrators Perceive Awareness of Behaviors

Behavior	Mean of Extent of Awareness Students (n=221)	Administrator (n=28)
Fights	2.47	3.43*
Threats with weapons	2.20	3.32*
Verbal threats	2.17	2.89*
Things damaged or stolen	2.69	2.79
Bullying	2.15	2.71*
Punching, hitting, grabbing	2.21	2.82*
Sexual harassment	2.17	2.87*
Spitting	1.72	2.75*
Teasing,swearing,name calling	2.19	2.75*
Ethnic conflict	2.28	3.18*

Students and Administrator ranked awareness of violent incidents on a 5-point scale; 4= Always; 3= Most of the time; 2= Sometimes; 1= Never; Undecided.
* Significance at $\alpha = .05$

Table 7. Extent to which Students Indicated Satisfaction with the Treatment of Victims and Perpetrators of School Violence.

Behavior	Mean of Extent of Student Satisfaction Victims (n=221)	Perpetrators (n=221)
Fights	2.45*	3.21
Threats with weapons	2.68*	3.38
Verbal threats	2.19*	3.07
Things damaged or stolen	2.29*	3.07
Bullying	2.18*	3.07
Punching, hitting, grabbing	2.41*	3.00
Sexual harassment	2.41*	3.09
Spitting on someone	2.11*	2.91
Teasing,swearing,name calling	2.16*	2.89
Ethnic conflict	2.51*	3.20

Students ranked Satisfaction on a 5-point scale 4= Always; 3= Most of the time; 2= Sometimes; 1= Never; Undecided * Significance at $\alpha = 0.05$.

Table 8. Extent to Which Administrators and Students Perceive Students would Report Victimization

Behavior	Means of Extent of Students' Reporting of Victimization Total Students (n=231)	 Administrator (n=28)
Fights	2.74	3.18
Threats with weapons	2.26*	3.00
Verbal threats	2.91	2.50*
Things damaged or stolen	2.66	2.75
Bullying	2.79	2.64
Punching, hitting, grabbing	2.77	2.68
Sexual harassment	2.55	2.82
Spitting	2.77	2.87
Teasing,swearing,name calling	2.96	2.71*
Ethnic conflict	2.73	2.91

Students and Administrator responded on a 4-point scale; 4= Always; 3= Most of the time; 2= Sometimes; 1= Never. * Significance at α =.05

Table 9. Extent to Which Administrators and Students Perceive the Observed Extent of School Violence

Behavior	Means of Extent of Observed Extent of School Violence Total Students (n=231)	 Administrator (n=28)
Fights	2.55	2.18*
Threats with weapons	1.86	1.79
Verbal threats	2.64	1.21*
Things damaged or stolen	2.75	1.96*
Bullying	2.67	2.15*
Punching, hitting, grabbing	2.68	2.11*
Sexual harassment	2.05	1.64*
Spitting	1.99	1.68
Teasing,swearing,name calling	2.95	2.29*
Ethnic conflict	2.19	1.46*

Students and Administrator responded on a 4-point scale; 4= Always; 3= Most of the time; 2= Sometimes; 1= Never. * Significance at α =.05

Table 10. Percentage Distribution of Students who Classified Behaviors as Major or Minor Conflicts

Behavior	Percentage "Major"	Percentage "Minor"	Undecided
Fights	37.7	56.3	6.1
Threats with weapons	71.4	19.9	8.7
Verbal threats	30.3	61.9	7.8
Things damaged or stolen	63.6	30.7	5.6
Bullying	37.2	52.4	10.4
Punching, hitting, grabbing	51.9	44.2	3.9
Sexual harassment	71.9	21.2	6.9
Spitting	14.3	75.3	10.4
Teasing,swearing,name calling	30.3	64.9	4.8
Ethnic conflict	61.0	26.0	13.0

Students marked with a check(√) if they would classify behaviors as minor or major conflict infractions, or if they were undecided.

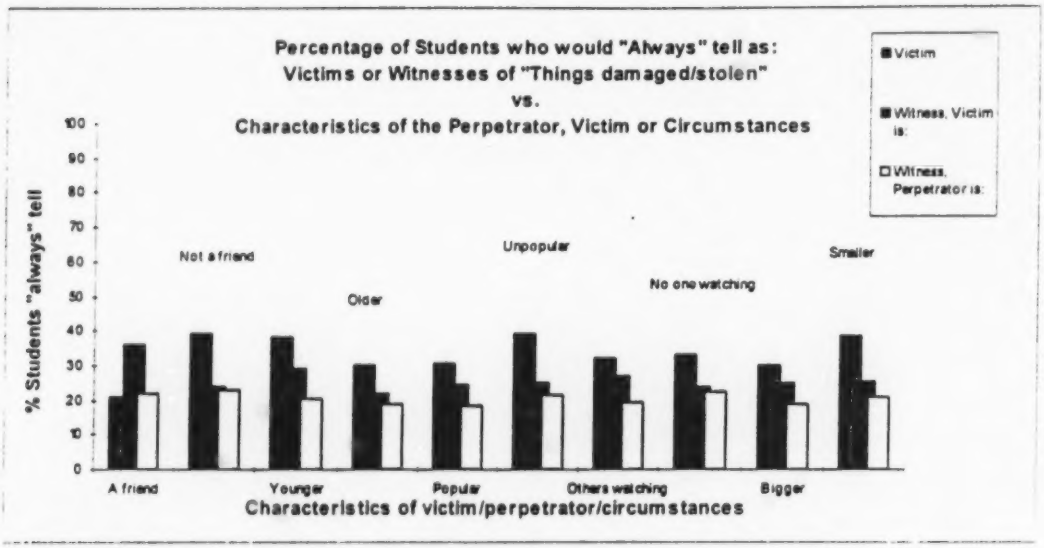

Figure 1. Students were asked to mark with a check (√) conditions in which they would "always," "sometimes," "most of the time," or "never" tell about witnessing or being a victim.

Table 11. Student Reporting of Victimization and Witnessing of School-based Violence.

CONDITION	VARIABLE	Fights	Verbal Threats	Threats with weapons	Teasing, swearing, name calling	Punching hitting, grabbing	Things damaged/ stolen	Bullying	Sexual Harassment	Ethnic Conflict
Friend										
	Victim, perpetrator is:	1.82	1.70	3.06	1.53	2.06	2.27	1.90	2.84	2.24
	Witness, victim is:	2.55	2.17	3.14	1.89	2.43	2.81	2.43	3.03	2.61
	Witness perpetrator:	2.03	1.77	2.82	1.70	1.97	2.32	1.95	2.73	2.43
Not a friend										
	Victim, perpetrator is:	2.69	2.19	3.23	1.79	2.51	2.96	2.43	3.16	2.50
	Witness, victim is:	2.23	1.89	2.95	1.78	2.19	2.55	2.11	2.82	2.46
	Witness perpetrator:	2.26	1.97	2.84	1.79	2.09	2.47	2.09	2.78	2.53
Younger										
	Victim, perpetrator is:	2.15	1.99	3.16	1.72	2.29	2.87	2.20	3.04	2.43
	Witness, victim is:	2.51	2.05	2.99	1.82	2.31	2.66	2.28	2.96	2.56
	Witness perpetrator:	2.21	1.93	2.83	1.77	2.09	2.41	2.05	2.79	2.54
Older										
	Victim, perpetrator is:	2.36	2.08	3.17	1.70	2.34	2.69	2.26	3.04	2.39
	Witness, victim is:	2.23	1.96	2.98	1.77	2.19	2.49	2.09	2.89	2.47
	Witness perpetrator:	2.11	1.87	2.82	1.72	2.04	2.34	2.02	2.78	2.48
Popular										
	Victim, perpetrator is:	2.14	1.85	3.09	1.69	2.22	2.59	2.09	2.99	2.31
	Witness, victim is:	2.25	1.96	2.94	1.70	2.17	2.50	2.12	2.86	2.47
	Witness perpetrator:	2.06	1.84	2.79	1.68	2.04	2.31	1.99	2.73	2.46
Unpopular										
	Victim, perpetrator is:	2.63	2.20	3.22	1.74	2.51	2.94	2.31	3.12	2.42
	Witness, victim is:	2.28	1.99	2.99	1.78	2.19	2.53	2.17	2.91	2.48
	Witness perpetrator:	2.19	1.98	2.82	1.75	2.09	2.43	2.05	2.78	2.53
Others watching										
	Victim, perpetrator is:	2.05	1.90	3.09	1.65	2.21	2.64	2.07	3.01	2.30
	Witness, victim is:	2.19	1.91	2.92	1.72	2.14	2.52	2.06	2.86	2.46
	Witness perpetrator:	2.09	1.84	2.81	1.74	2.06	2.34	2.03	2.75	2.52
No one watching										
	Victim, perpetrator is:	2.29	1.99	3.19	1.67	2.29	2.77	2.24	3.05	2.34
	Witness, victim is:	2.28	1.91	2.95	1.75	2.19	2.49	2.06	2.87	2.48
	Witness perpetrator:	2.11	1.87	2.82	1.73	2.06	2.36	2.03	2.76	2.49
Physically bigger										
	Victim, perpetrator is:	2.08	1.96	3.14	1.96	2.24	2.54	2.17	2.99	2.33
	Witness, victim is:	2.23	1.92	2.93	1.73	2.19	2.53	2.09	2.83	2.47
	Witness perpetrator:	2.04	1.83	2.80	1.68	2.05	2.29	2.01	2.72	2.42
Physically smaller										
	Victim, perpetrator is:	2.26	2.07	3.14	1.69	2.32	2.89	2.25	3.03	2.39
	Witness, victim is:	2.38	1.97	2.99	1.78	2.24	2.55	2.17	2.90	2.52
	Witness perpetrator:	2.17	1.91	2.83	1.78	2.12	2.39	2.09	2.77	2.50

Students responded on a 4-point scale, conditions under which they would report: 4= Always, 3= Most of the Time, 2= Sometimes, 1= Never, and Undecided.

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